

What if We've All Been Wrong About the Peace Process?

Haaretz Op-ED, March 19 2000

Rabinowitz Danny

The open letter to the Israeli public, signed by more than a hundred Palestinian intellectuals from the West Bank, Gaza and abroad ("What's happening now will end in some form of apartheid," by Amira Hass, March 13), is no routine missive. Its contents are too important, and perhaps too meaningful for the future of Israel, for them to vanish in the constant flood of petitions, letters and manifestos published in the Israeli press. The Palestinian intellectuals, many of whom come from circles that have never before addressed the Israeli zeitgeist, place central importance on a dilemma that is emerging as crucial to the Israeli-Palestinian process. It is not a tactical dilemma, nor even a strategic one of the kind that negotiators are so expert at neutralizing on the road to another interim settlement. This dilemma involves nothing less than a historic choice between two views of the negotiation process.

One view, which is accepted by the majority of Israelis, considers Oslo a positive, symmetric process: an elected government in Israel is conducting peace negotiations with a Palestinian leadership that reflects the true interests of the Palestinian people. Pursuing this joint path will ultimately lead to a durable peace between the two peoples.

The second view, which is asserted by the signatories to the letter, considers Oslo an inherently asymmetric process whose forgone conclusion is not only unfair, but also dangerous. The gist here is that Israel, which is strong, big, rich and backed by a superpower, is conducting negotiations of a coercive nature with a weak Palestinian leadership that has sold out. Arafat, his aides and the few thousand families that are close to his government are mere puppets with no will of their own and without the ability to engage in true diplomatic maneuvering. The corruption and despotism constantly being exposed in the economy, judicial system, human rights record and other areas of the Palestinian Authority demonstrate that the thrust of the leadership in the West Bank and Gaza is to preserve its own rule and to divvy up the financial and symbolic spoils flowing in from donor

[זויכראב שופיח](#)

[תובתכ תשיכר](#)

[עדימ זויכראה לע](#)

[זובשח בצמ](#)

[המסיס יוניש](#)

[תוריש](#)

[תובוגת](#)

[המסיס יתחכש](#)

nations. This view of the process sees the true national interest of millions of Palestinians in the territories and the diaspora ground into the dust.

Oslo talks: between Jews and Jews

The latter interpretation leads to two important insights in the letter. One is that if there are any genuine negotiations taking place in the framework of the current process, they are being conducted between Jews and Jews in Israel. The signatories do not belittle the intra-Jewish debate. They only point out that it cannot provide a basis for a historic settlement between Israel and Palestine. The second insight is that under these circumstances, no settlement signed between Israel and the Palestinian leadership will create stability. Even if the current Palestinian leadership accepts Israeli dictates, the Palestinian people will not always accept them. The apathy, weariness and despair of mainstream Palestinians toward the diplomatic process in recent years will sooner or later yield to rage and frustration, and erupt in a dangerous spiral of violence. Whether or not that violence assumes a religious cast, and whether or not other Middle East states become involved in it - Israel will certainly suffer from it.

A binational state

There are quite a few signs that the dowry of concessions that Prime Minister Ehud Barak intends to bring to the discussions on the final status settlement is not substantially different from what Ariel Sharon, Benjamin Netanyahu or Silvan Shalom would have offered. As it stands now, it seems that the main offering is Israel's readiness to recognize (explicitly or implicitly) an independent state that Arafat intends to declare on the patchwork of fragmented, narrow strips of territory - which are dependent on Israel - and that were already handed over to the Palestinians in the interim settlements. Barak, like many Israelis, views such a gesture as highly generous - a serious concession by Israel. However, most Palestinians see it as the continuation of the occupation by other means. The gap between the two views is scattered with the seeds of an unavoidable tragedy. The most recent results of the "peace index," carried out by Tel Aviv University's Steinmetz Center for Peace Studies shows that most Israelis continue to consider the Oslo process to be serious and credible. For the Israeli mainstream, that process is perceived as the only road to peace - we may tarry on it, but we will surely find a happy ending. The Palestinian intellectuals who signed the open

letter, contending that they understand and represent the mind-set of the Palestinian people, challenge the Israeli assumption that the peace process will produce a happy solution.

The intellectuals assert two alternatives they believe could produce the peace for which everyone longs: either a Palestinian state on all of the West Bank and Gaza Strip with true political and economic independence, or a binational state covering the entire area of Israel/Palestine. Such ideas may sound like pipe dreams to many Israelis. But those who consider themselves supporters of the peace process must pay attention to the alternative logic that these arguments reflect.

The Prime Minister's Bureau, too, should carefully consider the possibility that the letter presents more accurate intermediate and long-range scenarios. By ignoring the theoretical possibility that the Palestinians who wrote the letter are right and that the policy-making establishment in Jerusalem is wrong, Barak's advisers are effectively gambling irresponsibly on the future of the entire Middle East.